

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH WINS NATIONAL AWARD FOR EFFORT TO
IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HEALTH PROVIDERS AND NON-ENGLISH
SPEAKING RESIDENTS**

(RICHMOND, Va.) – The Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Health Care Services Initiative, referred to as CLAS Act, has won a 2007 Vision Award as an outstanding and creative state health program from the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

CLAS Act aims to overcome the language and cultural barriers to health care faced by the state's culturally and linguistically diverse populations in order to improve health and promote equity in health care for all Virginians. "Virginia is working to meet the needs of its changing demographics as demonstrated by the CLAS Act Virginia Initiative," said Governor Kaine, "Addressing language and culture are key factors to advancing health equity for all Virginians."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security ranks Virginia among the top 10 states with the largest immigrant resident populations. According to the U.S. census, between 1990 and 2006 the state's Asian population more than doubled and the Hispanic population almost tripled.

To meet the communication and cultural needs of residents whose primary language is not English, VDH's Office of Minority Health and Public Health Policy hired CLAS Act Coordinator Fatima Sharif in 2006 to assess and address the cultural competence and language needs of VDH employees. She has performed a Language Needs Assessment and a Cultural Sensitivity Needs Assessment of each of the department's 35 health districts, and has developed a course to provide cultural competency training to the VDH workforce. To date more than 300 VDH employees have completed the course. In addition, VDH employees have 24/7 access by phone to interpreters and translators. VDH district offices will display posters informing clients of the staffs' ability to reach interpreters of 30 languages.

"Research has shown that improvements in communication lead to better health outcomes, greater patient satisfaction and reduce the cost of health care related to delays in accessing basic preventive care," Sharif said.

CLAS Act's Web site, www.clasactvirginia.org, gives any health provider in Virginia access to a range of language and cultural resources. These include commonly used clinical phrases which have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese. The printed phrases are accompanied by audio versions that can be played directly to a client and practiced by the provider. The site also contains links to more than 1,300 documents that have been translated into numerous languages.

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